

Ferraris-Besso on Moran (2017)

Moran, Claire. *Staging the Artist: Performance and the Self-Portrait from Realism to Impressionism*. Routledge, 2017, pp. 192, ISBN 978-1-4094-2775-9

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Banksy's shredded art and Éric Chevillard's blog, *L'Autofictif*, are recent examples of successful uses of performance, marketing, and promotion. Such strategies are common for twenty-first-century artists and writers, but Claire Moran argues that they originate in the nineteenth century, when a culture of performance was integral to aesthetics but "also implicit to the status of the artist." The public image of the artist was thus staged, "through self-portraiture, social behavior and above all, writing." *Staging the Artist: Performance and the Self-Portrait from Realism to Impressionism* centers on three painters: Gustave Courbet, Paul Gauguin, and James Ensor, who best exemplify the use of "theatrical devices to create artistic personae and to develop their Modernist aesthetics" (1). Rather than devoting a chapter to each of them, Moran divides her study into three thematic parts illustrating how different facets of the works and lives of the artists contributed to the staging of the self.

In the first chapter, "The Pose and the Posture," Moran shows how those artists created an artistic identity through self-fictionalization and self-posturing. A careful reading of Courbet's letters and an analysis of some of his self-portraits highlight the fact that his media image as an ignorant peasant was destined to serve his painting ambitions by allowing him to present himself as a "maverick" (22). Likewise, Gauguin's "savagery," orchestrated through self-portraits and *Noa Noa*, "had the primary purpose of promoting his 'primitive' art" (43). In the case of Ensor, the eccentric image was also elaborated through self-portraiture, but also "public and private letters and a number of semi-autobiographical texts" (60). Moreover, other self-images (*Mirror with Skeleton*, 1890; *Skeleton Drawing Fine Pranks*, 1889) show "the extent to which [Ensor] meditated on the farcical and fabricated nature of his persona" (73). The modernity of these artists lies, according to Moran, precisely in the intellectual distance they maintained from the public personae they crafted for themselves.

"Role-Playing and Acting" focuses on roles and fictional identities assumed by the three painters. They have two functions: to act as an "ironic counter-discourse" through which they comment on their persona and aesthetic, and to engage the audience, forcing it "to adopt a questioning, reflective attitude towards modern art and modernity" (82). In the case of Courbet, it is visible in disguised self-portraits, "built upon his theorization of the necessity of separation between self and character, visible in his social behaviour and made explicit in his early letters" (84). What is particularly striking in Courbet is his use of performative writing, where the telling of the story is "yet another role-play, another performance" (85). As for Gauguin, not only does he use alter egos—Meyer de Haan, the Christ figure—to toy with roles in his paintings, he also writes pseudonymously to air grievances against his perceived enemies. Those various "masks" "all reveal an artist who uses disguise to aesthetic effect" (107). Ensor, a lover and practitioner of pranks and masquerade, similarly uses masks in his art in order to "shock spectators out of their passivity, compelling them to engage intellectually with the performance they witness" (108). This culminates in his 1891 *Man of Sorrows*, which "brings together the figure of Christ, the mask, and Ensor himself" (124), in a grotesque, expressive self-portrait. Moran likens those role-playing practices to Berthold Brecht's alienation effect: they are meant to challenge the viewer at the same time as they offer a counter aesthetic.

The third chapter, "Aesthetic Performances," attempts to critically reconcile theatricality and Modernist aesthetics by demonstrating that theater is used as a trope to reveal the artifice of representation. For example, *The Quarry* presents Courbet in the guise of a hunter. Hunting is depicted as a game, with specific attire and roles, like theater. Even though everything is "plausible at first sight," the five different groups that constitute the painting are not in dialogue with one another and *The Quarry* captures a moment "before the audience has arrived" (135). It thus displays its own artificiality. *The Artist's Studio*, whose composition is reminiscent of a stage set, shows "Courbet performing as an artist within a larger allegory" about theater. With those paintings, he "questions Realism as an artistic practice" (133). In Gauguin, theatricality is particularly evident in *Vision after the Sermon*, which depicts a group of Breton women watching the struggle of Jacob—to whom Gauguin gave his features—with the Angel. This scene, though, is a vision: the women are imagining it. The real struggle in the painting is thus "that between reality and the imagination." Through this "staged representation," Gauguin calls "into attention the processes of viewing and interpreting the work of art" (146). Also rife with pictorial allusions to theater, Ensor's *The Entry of Christ into Brussels in 1889* plays with the materiality of paint and presents "three different perspective systems" (156) to emphasize the apparatus of representation (159).

In *Staging the Artist: Performance and the Self-Portrait from Realism to Impressionism*, Moran marshals less studied materials, such as letters or Gauguin's memoirs, *Avant et après*. Juxtaposing them with careful analyses of a great number of

paintings and images, she demonstrates not only the keen eye of an art historian, but also admirable close reading skills. At the onset of her convincingly argued and well-illustrated study, Moran aptly uses the term “visual autofiction” (17) to qualify some of the works by Courbet, Gauguin, and Ensor she studies. *Staging the Artist* will therefore appeal to a variety of scholars, in particular those interested in autobiography studies and those concerned with visual culture, from the nineteenth to the twentieth-first century where the aftermath of the self-staging initiated by those three painters continues to be felt more than ever.

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